

Dora and Jews

Paul Rassinier

On June 30, 1937, Buchenwald was only what its name means, a forest of beech trees, a place perched on a foot hill of the Harz mountains, five and a half miles from Weimar. One reached it by a stony, winding path. One day some men came by car to the foot of the hill. They climbed to the top on foot, as though it were an excursion. They carefully inspected the area. One of them pointed out a clearing; then they returned after having had a good luncheon at Weimar.

“Unser Führer wird zufrieden werden,” they said. (Our Fuhrer will be pleased.)

Sometime later others came. They were chained together by fives, one to the other and constituted a detachment of a hundred men, surrounded by about twenty S.S., guns in hand. There was no more room in the German prisons. They climbed up the path as best they could, sworn at and kicked. When they reached the top exhausted, they were put to work without any delay. A group of fifty put up tents for the S.S., while the other group put in place a circle of barbed wire, three strands high and about a hundred yard in diameter. The first day that was all that could be done. They ate a meagre meal in a hurry and almost without stopping work and, very late in the evening, they went to sleep right on the ground, wrapped in thin coverings. The next day, the first group of fifty unloaded all day long construction materials and sections of wooden barracks which heavy tractors managed to bring about half way up the hill; they carried this material the rest of the way up on their backs and placed it inside the barbed wire. The second group cut down trees to clear the area. They did not eat that day because they had started off in the first place with food for one day only. But, they slept better that night in the shelter of the branches and among the piles of boards.

Beginning with the third day, sections of barracks began to arrive at a faster rate and began to pile up half way up the hill. There were also a kitchen outfit, quantities of striped clothing, some tools, and some supplies. The S.S. stated in their daily report that with one hundred men they could not keep up with material delivered. Others were sent them. The rations then were insufficient. At the end of the week, some fifty S.S. struggled with about a thousand prisoners who they did not know where to put at night, who they could barely feed, and who overwhelmed their ability to supervise. The prisoners were made up into several groups, or Kommandos, each detailed to a particular job: the kitchen for the S.S., the orderlies for their camp, the kitchen of the prisoners, the construction of the barracks, the transport of material, the administration accounting. All of these operations were called S.S. Küche, Häftlingsküche, Barrakenkommando Bauleitung, Arbeitsstatistik, etc., and on paper, in reports, it looked like a simple and methodical organization. But it was, in fact, a complete mess, a horrible swarming of men, who went through the motion of eating, who worked haphazardly, and who barely slept covered in a jumble of branches and boards. Since it was easier to keep them under surveillance when they

were working than when they were sleeping, the days were twelve, fourteen or sixteen hours long. Since there were not enough guards, they were forced to select a complement of trustees out of the whole lot of the prisoners on appearances alone, who, since they had uneasy consciences, created a reign of terror by way of excusing and justifying themselves. Blows rained, not just insults and threats.

The bad treatment, the poor and insufficient food, the super-human work, the lack of medicines, and the pneumonia created conditions that caused this gang of men to die at an alarming rate, endangering the general health. The S.S. had to think of another way to get rid of the bodies other than by burial which took too much time and which was too often repeated: so they had turned to cremation, a procedure that was much faster and in conformity with Germanic traditions. Another Kommando, in its turn, became indispensable, the Totenkommando, and the construction of a crematorium was put on the list of "urgent" work to be done. Thus it happened that a place was built for men to die in, before the place was built for them to live in. Everything is linked together: evil attracts evil, and when one is caught in the mesh of evil forces...

Moreover, the camp was not conceived in the minds of the National-Socialist authorities to be just a camp, but a community working under supervision for the building of the Third Reich, just like the other individuals of the German community who remained in relative liberty. As a consequence, after the crematorium came the factory, the Guzlow. So it is seen that the order of precedence for all the installations was determined first by the need to keep everything well under guard, second by hygienic requirements, and third by the demands of work that constituted the *raison d'être* for the camp. Everything was subordinate to the collective interest which trampled down and crushed the individual.

Buchenwald was thus, during the period of the first installations, a Straflager (punishment camp) where only those considered incorrigible in other prisons were sent. Then, from the moment that the factory, the Guzlow, was ready to go, an Arbeitslager (labor camp) with Strafkommandos. Finally, it was transformed into a Konzentrationslager (concentration camp) which is what it was when we knew it, a camp equipped with all the amenities of a small city, where everyone was sent without discrimination. Around the central camp there were satellite camps, which it kept supplied with human material. All the camps went through these three stages successively. Unfortunately, with the war breaking out, prisoners from all places, of all kinds, in for all kinds of reasons, and under all kinds of disciplinary punishment, were haphazardly, because of the disorder of the circumstances, and indiscriminately sent to a Straflager, an Arbeitslager, or a Konzentrationslager. The result was a frightening mixture of all kinds of humanity which resembled, under the sign of the truncheon, a gigantic basket of crabs, over which National-Socialism, so sure of itself and so methodical in its operations, but overwhelmed on all sides by events which were beginning to master it, threw an immense Noah's mantle.

Dora was born under the sponsorship of Buchenwald and in the same way. It grew and prospered following the same process.

In 1903, German engineers and chemists had discovered that the stone of the Harz mountains in that area was rich in ammonia. Since no private company was willing to risk capital in its extraction, the Government undertook it. Germany did not possess, as did her neighbors,

colonies that were able to put at her disposal men from Cayenne or Nouméa. Because of this fact, together with the fact that she was obliged to keep her convicts inside the country, they were imprisoned in certain places where they were used for especially disagreeable labor. As a consequence, a convict prison, like all convict prisons in the world, except for a few minor differences, was created at Dora. In 1910, for reasons unknown, but most likely because the yield of ammonia was much smaller than was anticipated, quarrying the stone was stopped. It was resumed during the war of 1914-1918, as a sort of punitive camp for prisoners of war at a time when Germany was already beginning to think of going underground to escape some of the devastation of bombing. Again the operation was interrupted by the Armistice. Between the two wars, Dora was completely forgotten: wild tangled growth masked the entrance to the excavations and, all around, vast fields of sugar-beets were cultivated to supply the sugar refinery at Nordhausen, three and a half miles away.

It was into these beet fields that on September 1, 1943, Buchenwald disgorged a first well escorted Kommando of two hundred men. Germany, again feeling the need to go underground or at least to put her war industries underground, had taken up the project of 1915 again. Construction of the S.S. camp and of the crematorium was begun, underground factory was set up, and the kitchens, showers, the Arbeitstatistik, the Revier, or infirmary, were built, last of all. So long as the underground work existed, the S.S. delayed as long as possible, putting off always a little longer, the unprofitable work of constructing Blocks for the prisoners, preferring instead to dig the gallery of the tunnel farther in, and to make it possible to get as many factories as possible under protect from the ever increasing threats from the open sky.

When we arrived at Dora, the camp was still in the Straflager stage. We made an Arbeitslager out of it. When we left it with its 170 Blocks, its infirmary, its theater, its brothel, and with all its installations in place and its tunnel completed, it was on the point of becoming a Konzentrationslager. Already, at the other end of the double tunnel, there was another camp, Ellrich, its offspring, and which was itself in the Straflager stage. There could be no break in the descending curve of human misery.

But, the English and Americans and the Russians had decided otherwise, and, on April 11, 1945, they came to free us. Since then the penitentiary system of East Germany has been in the hands of the Russians who haven't changed things a fraction. Tomorrow, it will be in the hands of... who knows? Since there must be no gap in history.

A concentration camp, when it is completely set up, is a regular city which is isolated from the outside world which conceived it, which is surrounded by fences of electrified barbed wire, and which is guarded with special guards every fifty yards on platforms, armed to the teeth. To make the screen between the two even more dense, an S.S. garrison bordered the camp and at a distance of three or four miles all around sentinels were encamped. Thus, anyone trying to escape would have a certain number of obstacles to overcome, or perhaps it would be better to say that any attempt would be doomed to failure. This isolated city had its own laws and its own particular social phenomena. Any ideas born there, individually or collectively, were stopped at the barbed wire and remained unsuspected by the rest of the world. By the same token, almost

everything that took place in the outer world, was unknown on the inside, any penetration being made almost impossible by that screen. Newspapers came in; but, they were carefully selected and said nothing but those things that had been especially printed for the inmates in the concentration camp. It did happen in wartime that the “news” for the concentration camp inmates was the same as that which the Germans were supposed to take as gospel, and that is why the newspapers were the same for both, but it was pure chance. Use of the radio was punishable. It follows that camp life, organized on the other moral and sociological principles, had quite a different orientation from that of normal life. As a consequence, it revealed aspects that could not be judged by standards common to mankind in general. But, it was a city, and a human city.

Inside – or on the outside, but near by – a factory was the reason for its existence and its means of existence: at Buchenwald, the Guzlow; at Dora, the Tunnel. The factory was the keystone of the entire edifice, and its needs, which had to be satisfied, were the iron laws. The camp was made for the factory, and not the factory to keep the camp busy.

The most important department of the camp was the Arbeitsstatistik, which kept a strict accounting of the entire population, and kept track of each man day after day in his work. At the Arbeitsstatistik the personnel could tell you at any moment whatsoever of the day what each prisoner was doing and where he could be found. This department, like all the others, too, was entrusted to prisoner trustees and kept busy a considerable and privileged number of them.

Then came the Politische-Abteilung, which kept track of the political aspects of the camp and which was able to give for any prisoner any information wanted about his previous life, his moral conduct, the reasons for his arrest... It was the department of the anthropometry of the camp, its Sicherheitsdienst (security police), and employed only those prisoners in whom the S.S. had confidence. Once again the privileged.

Then the Verwaltung, or the general administration, which kept track of everything that came into the camp: food, material, clothing, etc... It was the quartermaster of the camp. Those prisoners employed in office work always occupied a privileged position.

These three big departments ran the camp. They had at their head a Kapo who ran them under the supervision of a non-commissioned officer of the S.S., or Rapportführer. There was a Rapportführer for all the key services, and each one of them reported every evening to the Rapportführer-general of the camp, who was an officer, generally an Oberleutnant. This Rapportführer-general communicated with the prison camp through the intermediary of his subordinates and the Lagerältester, or the doyen of the prisoners, who was responsible in general for the camp and who answered for its smooth running even with his life.

Similarly, the departments of the second level: the Sanitätsdienst, or health service, which included doctors, male nurses, disinfection, infirmary and crematorium services; the Lagerschutzpolizei, or camp police; the Feuerwerk, or fire protection; the Bunker, or jail for those prisoners caught breaking the rules of the camp; the Kino-Theater, or movie, and the brothel, or Pouf.

There were also the Küche, or kitchen; the Effecktenkammer, or clothing store, which was attached to the Verwaltung; the Häftlingskantine, or canteen, which supplied the prisoners with extra food and drinks in exchange for the coin of the realm; the Bank, where the special money good only in the camp was issued.

And, now to describe the mass of workers... They were divided up into Blocks constructed on the same plan as that of Buchenwald 48, but of wood, and with only one floor. They lived there only at night. They returned there at night after roll-call at about nine o'clock, and they left every morning before dawn, at half past four. They were supervised by the Block Chiefs who were surrounded by their Schreiber, Friseur, Stubendienst, who were veritable satraps. The Block Chief governed life in the Block through the supervision of an S.S. soldier, or Blockführer, who reported to the Rapportführer-general. The Blockführer were only rarely seen; generally they confined themselves to one friendly visit with the Block Chief during the day, that is, when the prisoners were away, so that it was the latter who was in effect the only authority, and practically all of his exactions were without appeal.

The population of the camp, its social composition, and its origins were also elements that were de-humanizing. I have already remarked that National-Socialism drew no distinctions between political crime and common crime, and that consequently, there was in Germany no distinction between the civil and the political regime. As in the prisons of most civilized nations, there was something of everything in the camps – of everything and something else besides. All of the prisoners, whatever social or criminal element they came from, lived together, under the same regulations. The only thing that distinguished them was the colored triangle on their prison clothing which was the insignia of their classification – i.e. their reason for being there.

Red was reserved for political crimes. For common crimes, there was a green triangle; it was plain for Verbrecher, or petty crimes; it was embellished with an "S" for Schwerverbrecher, or serious crimes, and a "K" for Kriegsverbrecher, or war crimes. Thus, a gradation was made from common crimes, such as a simple theft, to murder and to the theft of supplies or armaments.

Between these two extremes, there was a whole series of intermediary crimes; the black triangle (professionally unemployed); the pink triangle (pederasts and homosexuals); the yellow triangle reversed over a red one so as to form a star (Jews); purple triangle (conscientious objectors). In addition, those who had done a certain term in prison, and then, following their release, were incarcerated again for committing new crimes wore instead of the triangle a black circle on white background with a large "Z" in the center, which stood for those freed from the Zuchthaus or prison. And, finally, those who wore a red triangle with the point up had committed minor crimes in the army and had been sentenced by a court-martial.

To these were added a few special ones: the red triangle with a transverse bar for those sent to the Konsett for the second or third time; three black dots on a yellow and white brassard for the blind; the Wifo, the same circle as for the Zuchthaus people with the "Z" replaced by a "W." These latter had originally been volunteer workers. They had been employed by the Wifo firm which had been the first to try to achieve the Cergeltungfeurer, the famous V1 and V2 rockets.

One fine day, and for no apparent reason, they got the striped clothes and were put into concentration camps. The secret of the V1 and V2 having gone through the trial period and into the intensive production stage was not to be freely circulated, even among the German people. In other words, they were interned for reasons of State security. The Wifo were the most unfortunate people in the camp: they continued to be paid their salary, half of which was paid them in the camp itself, the rest being sent to their families. They had the right to keep their hair and to write whenever they wanted to, on condition that they said nothing about what had happened to them; and since they were the best off, they introduced the black market into the camp and raised the exchange.

As far as the population was concerned, the concentration camps were regular towers of Babel in which personalities clashed because of differences of origin, of their sentences, and previous social standing. The common law offenders hated the political criminals whom they didn't understand, and the latter returned the feeling. The intellectuals looked down on the manual laborers, and the latter rejoiced to see the former "working at last." The Russians wrapped the whole of the West in the same icy contempt. The Poles and the Czechs couldn't stand the French, because of Munich etc... On the nationality level, there were enmities between the Slavs and Germanic people, between the Germans and the Italians, between the Dutch and the Belgians, or between the Dutch and the Germans. The French, who came last and began to receive the most magnificent parcels of food, were looked down on by everybody except the Belgians, who were pleasant, frank, and good. France was regarded as a land of milk and honey, and her inhabitants as sybaritic degenerates, who were incapable of work, who ate well, and who were occupied only with making love. To these sentiments the Spaniards added the concentration camps of Daladier. I remember having been accosted in Block 24 at Dora by a vigorous: "Ah! The French; now you know what a Lager means. No harm, it'll teach you!"

It was one of the three Spaniards (there were 26 in all at Dora) who had been interned at Gurs in 1938, enrolled in labor companies in 1939, and sent to Buchenwald after Rethel. The three maintained that the only difference between the French and the German camps was the work; all other things, treatment, food, being just about the same. In fact they added that the French camps were dirtier.

Oh, Jiriczah!

The S.S. guards lived in a parallel camp. In general, they were a company. At first, this company was a training unit for young recruits, and only Germans were in it. Later on, the S.S. became more international in composition: Italians, Poles, Czechs, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Greeks, among others filled the ranks. The necessities of war had compelled the Germans to send the Young recruits to the front, often with limited military instruction, or even without any special preparation, and the young were replaced by the old, those who had already served in the war of 1914-1918, on whom National Socialism had made scarcely any imprint. They were less hard. In the last two years of the war, when there were not enough S.S., the rejects from the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe, who couldn't be used for anything else, were assigned as guards to the camps.

All the services of the camp had their parallel in the S.S. camp where everything was centralized, and from which daily or weekly reports were sent directly to Himmler's offices in Berlin. The S.S. camp was, therefore, the administrator of the other. When the camps were just beginning during the Straflager period, they were administered directly; afterwards, and as soon as possible, the S.S. carried on the camp administration only through the prisoners themselves as intermediaries. One would think that this arrangement was used out of sadism, and, after the war was over, that is what was said. But, it was really out of necessity to economize personnel that the system was used, and for that reason, in all prisons in all countries, the same situation holds. The S.S. itself only administered the camp when it was impossible for them to do otherwise. We know what self-government by the prisoners in the camps was. All of the old hands who have experienced both systems are unanimous in recognizing that the former was in principle the better and more humane, and that if it was not in fact, it was because wartime circumstances and the pressure of events did not permit it. I believe it; it is better to deal with God than with the saints.

So the S.S. guarded the perimeter of the camp, and it can be said that we hardly ever saw them inside the camp, except when they simply went through to take the salute of the prisoners, the famous "Müntzen ab." They were helped in their guard duty by a company of marvelously trained dogs, always ready to bite and capable of hunting out an escaped prisoner tens of miles away. Every morning, the Kommandos that were to work outside the camp, often they traveled three or four miles on foot – when they had to go farther, they used trucks or trains – were accompanied, according to their importance, by two or four S.S., guns in hand, each with a muzzled dog on a leash. This special guard, which complemented the surveillance of the Kapos, just kept watch from afar, and did not intervene in supervision of the prisoners unless a show of force was called for.

In the evening, at the roll-call by Block, when everyone was there, at a whistle, all the Blockführer turned toward the Block for which they were responsible, counted those present and then went back to report. During this operation non-coms went around the Blocks to enforce silence and attention. The Kapos, Block Chiefs, and Lagerschutz greatly helped them in making this task easy. From time to time an S.S. man stood out from the others for his brutality, but it was rare; and in no case was he ever more inhuman than the prisoner trustees who filled the positions that are mentioned in the preceding sentence.

Once again, my personal testimony: I refer to a group of Hungarian Jews whose convoy, originally bound for Auschwitz, had arrived at Dora at the end of May 1944. Of the 1,500 or so people of this convoy, a certain number were sent to satellite camps around Dora as soon as they arrived. How many remained with us I do not know; maybe they filled an entire block. Because of the racist policies of Nazism, they were to be completely isolated from the other prisoners. That block was surrounded by barbed wire. And from that protected block they went to work like everyone else, but as a separate Kommando. For them, assembly took place within the block, before their leaving for work and on their return. We envied them. Fifteen days after their arrival, if your clogs had been stolen in the night, if you wanted more bread, or if you required some tobacco or something else, you only had to make a quick dash to the Jewish block in the morning

between reveille and roll-call, or in the evening before lights out, and, in exchange for something else, you could get just about anything you wanted: it was a regular market. We admired them; at the gate of the camp they had been made to undress completely, and had been sent to be disinfected; they went in completely naked, their contact with the other prisoners was limited, and, all the same, they had succeeded in procuring a little of everything that could be obtained in the camp only with the greatest difficulties and at a very high price.

After a little while, the special surveillance over them became hardly more than a facade: once in a while we could exchange a few words with them, and even have short conversations. Thus it was that we learned about their odyssey. They told us about what they had had to leave behind when they came into the camp, and, since we were old hands in their eyes, they asked if they would get it back, when, how, and so on... They had been transported from Hungary to Dora, 70 to 80 persons in a car, with all of their baggage. They had made a long periplus of six to seven days before arriving. They had been told when leaving that they were being taken to Auschwitz, and when they learned that it was at Dora that they would be unloaded, they were pleased. They told the most appalling things about Auschwitz. There were neither women nor children among them. The latter had been separated out on departure, and at the moment it did not surprise us since that is what happened to us.

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